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False Gods — the love of money

IDOLS FROM THE START

NOT LONG AFTER the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt under the guiding hand of the Almighty the people were given statutes and laws which are now referred to as the Ten Commandments. Moses who was chosen by God to lead the people was instructed to ascend Mount Sinai to receive the Divine Law.

Moses was absent from his people, who were encamped at the foot of Sinai, for nearly six weeks during which time the people became restless and impatient thinking that their leader had deserted them and would not return. The Divine influence in the form of Moses had departed from them and they began to think like the other nations around them¹ forgetting the wonderful deliverance they had experienced — the direct intervention of the Creator in their affairs in the most remarkable manner.

Aaron, Moses' brother, who had been left to govern the nation, collected the people's gold and cast an image of a calf.² The people then declared of the molten calf *'These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.'*² Aaron then tried to persuade the people differently by building an altar before the image and declaring that tomorrow there was to be a feast to the Lord.

The rest of the story we can read at our leisure but this record serves to teach us that mankind has a ready tendency to depart from God who created him and seek comfort in his own imagination.

IDOLS ALL THE WAY

This example is repeated after the days of Solomon whose influence for good in the sight of God became diverted by his pagan wives. Jeroboam was chosen to rule the ten tribes of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) but he deliberately led the people astray by making two calves of gold one of which he set in the north of his kingdom and the other in the south.

¹Exodus 32.1 ²Exodus 32.4

His declaration was almost identical to that of the people in Sinai '*It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.*'³ This man entrusted with the exalted task of leading his people in the fear of the Lord, found it easier and possibly more satisfying from a human viewpoint to encourage the nation to depart from strict obedience to the Divine statutes and to indulge in practises which pander to the mind of the flesh.

GOD'S OPINION

Later still the prophet Isaiah was moved by God to utter words of warning to His people with regard to idolatry; their propensity for this evil continued undiminished. The prophet alludes to the absurdity of a man cutting down a tree, using part of it to make a fire for the purpose of cooking a meal to satisfy his natural needs and taking another part of the same tree to make an idol. He then falls down, worships it and says:

'Deliver me; for thou art my god.'⁴

WHY DOES HE DO IT?

Mankind possesses a nature that needs to admire, respect and follow the example of another and sadly it is only too natural for us to follow the lead which fits most readily into our way of thinking and gives us the most pleasure. But the Scriptures warn time and time again that mankind, if he is to please God, must follow the Divine instruction contained in His Word and avoid pursuits which deny the Creator; stealing the glory which is His and giving it to sticks and stones or any other practice, pastime, possession or interest that might take a man's fancy.

THE APOSTLES' WARNING

The apostles' letters in the New Testament are no less insistent upon a departure from idolatry. In fact many of the first century Christians had previously been idolaters before they had heard and accepted the Gospel message; '*... how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.*'⁵

The Thessalonians had realised the folly of their idolatrous ways and had now put their trust in a real hope which would save them from an eternal grave; this hope was bound up with the resurrection of Christ and his return from heaven to bring that salvation. This is the true Gospel message.

RELIANCE ON SOMETHING ELSE

We may be astonished that intelligent people can imagine that mere replicas of some real or imaginary creature or person, however beautifully carved or cast and artistically decorated, can possess powers to bring rain during time of drought and

³1 Kings 12.28 ⁴Isaiah 44.17 ⁵1 Thessalonians 1.9,10

famine, or to guide someone through periods of danger and doubt. But over the centuries mankind has felt constrained to put his trust in something other than himself.

Powerful commanders of past civilisations looked in the liver to determine which route to travel.⁶ In more recent times, to take one example, some felt the tea-leaves at the bottom of a cup held the secret of the future.

Today, there is a growing dependence on the story the stars might have to tell.

MAN'S NEED TO TRUST

All this confirms to the believer in God that man needs to trust in a superior power who will oversee events for him and is really an admission that he cannot control events that might affect him — wanting as he does the best for himself. In our modern age, certainly in the West, man has been able to make his position more certain by becoming far more knowledgeable⁷ about his environment and about many of those things which overthrew their forefathers.

He has more self-confidence and self-reliance not feeling at the mercy of unknown forces as he did at one time. This has made him feel less in need of support from what he thought of as unknown superior powers or fate. So successful has he now become that God has been banished from his mind and he has entered into an age where he worships himself, his fellows or his machines.

THE LOVE OF MONEY

Money has become all powerful and the search for riches has a part in the lives of most with their football pools, their preoccupation with promotion and advancement at work, their schooling etc. — all geared towards greater financial reward. Success appears to make life certain and gives the feeling that the possessor of riches has control. Because the Creator has been replaced in men's minds by the power of money, men have also lost that sense of responsibility which an acknowledgement of God brings.

So he has become lawless and the only standard of good and evil employed is what he thinks is best for him. Democracy is acknowledged world-wide as the best form of political organisation that man has devised. It prevents the downtreading of the less fortunate and gives everybody a say in how things are done and what policies are to be implemented.

In very recent times democracy has made great progress in Eastern Europe. With power in the hands of the people what can prevent man from reaching Utopia? The answer to this is — man himself.

⁶ Ezekiel 21.21 ⁷ Daniel 12.4

The prophet Jeremiah had something to say about this '*O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps. O LORD, correct me, but with judgment; not in thine anger, lest thou bring me to nothing.*'⁸ The Divine plan, however, is very different from this pinnacle of human political achievement — Democracy.

TRUSTING IN GOD'S PLAN

God's plan is to establish a Kingdom upon this earth which will not be confined to a given territory but will encompass the whole earth. It will not be limited by the extent of this or that dynasty but will last forever. Its laws will be Divine and all the peoples of the earth will learn of God's ways. Its King will be just and righteous and all men will be fairly treated and all the evils of the world today will be expelled. The King will be Jesus Christ.

WHAT WE CAN DO

In following him now we can prepare for that time of new life for the world — '*Behold, I make all things new.*'⁹ Paul advises his readers on many aspects of their way of life in following Jesus' example thus —

'Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you also once walked when you lived in them.'¹⁰

This list of evils was associated with the practices of idolaters, successfully luring men and women to seek for sensation and pleasure — not unlike the vast majority of people today who have forsaken God and aim instead to serve themselves with every kind of pleasure and comfort the ingenuity of man can dream up.

This idea is repeated by the Apostle as follows:

'For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them. For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light . . .'¹¹

It is noteworthy that these last references include in their lists the word '*covetousness*' and '*covetous man*' which in both cases are closely connected with the word idolatry. One dictionary defines the word covetous in this way — '*Eagerly desirous; eager to obtain and possess; avaricious;*' The Law given by God to Moses, previously mentioned, prohibited any form of covetousness.¹²

⁸Jeremiah 10.23,24 ⁹Revelation 21.5 ¹⁰Col 3.5-7 (NKJV) ¹¹Eph 5.5-8 ¹²Exodus 20.17

Christ explained that the whole of the law rested on two Divine principles which were to love God and to love *'thy neighbour as thyself'*.¹³ The principles underlying the commandments of Christ also require his followers to honour and obey God and to respect the person and property of his fellows. Consider the fate of four people who allowed the lust for money and possession to rule their actions.¹⁴

SOMETHING TO AVOID

Covetousness, therefore, should not be allowed to enter into the thinking of a true Christian. But what do we find? Today's society in so-called christian countries especially in Western Europe exhibits unbridled lust for possession and pleasure. How different they are from the one whose name they claim to bear.

The whole economic fabric of these societies depends on the desire of the ordinary people to accumulate possessions, to compete with their fellows in the acquiring of goods that proclaim their success and good taste. This tendency of mankind is fanned into flame by displays of all sorts, advertising of all kinds using the most unchristian images to promote the most ordinary products and the ever present financial institutions offering the easiest of payment terms bringing those who succumb into bondage to them.

The true Christian attitude is set out by the Apostle Paul —

'For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. **But they that will be rich** fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.'¹⁵

TRUE PEACE

Average western people are reduced to spending their lives earning money to satisfy their wants, large amounts of time shopping and relaxing. They have little time to consider what their lives amount to, what their end will be and what their responsibilities to their Maker are. Contentment is a state of mind enjoyed by few. It can only come from an understanding of the promises God has made. The world is busy with its own affairs and men constantly complain they have no time — but those who rely on their Maker are spoken of by Isaiah:

'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee. Trust ye in the LORD for ever: for in the LORD JEHOVAH is everlasting strength.'¹⁶

¹³Matthew 22.36-40 ¹⁴II King 5; Mark 14.10,11 & 43-45; Matthew 27.3-5 Act 5.1-11

¹⁵I Timothy 6.7-11 ¹⁶Isaiah 26.3,4

The Apostle Paul also encourages his brethren along similar lines:

‘And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ.’¹⁷

The Scriptures, therefore, invite us to step aside from the vain activities of the world in general, the greed, the lust, the corruption, the pride, the violence, the crime and the self-interest and turn to matters of faith and obedience and of hope for those things which God has promised.

J Morse
Kingswinford

¹⁷Phil 4.7

Mary, the Mother of Christ

MARY'S POSITION AND role in the ancestral line of Jesus was crucial to the accomplishment of God's purpose to raise up a Saviour for the human race; but her personal achievements are never allowed to overshadow or distract from the great purpose in mind. Mary played her part well, and her beauty of character is well worth pondering on and emulating; but she is only background to the role and accomplishments of her beloved Son, and the main object of this study must be to show how God was able to use this willing tool to achieve His great purpose of redemption.

She is introduced into the record as a young woman occupying a humble status in life, in spite of a noble ancestry. Her family roots were in Judea, where her cousin Elisabeth still dwelt, but she had moved north to Nazareth, a town in the rather impoverished area of Galilee. There she had become '*espoused*' (ie engaged to be married) to a hard working '*craftsman*' (traditionally said to be a carpenter, although the Greek term '*tekton*' merely indicates any skilled trade).

Joseph was also descended from the royal house of David: in fact his ancestry went back directly to the succession of the kings of Judah, as traced for us in Matthew 1; whereas Mary's line, as traced in Luke 3, was derived from another son of David, Nathan brother to Solomon.

But their derivation from King David was only of academic value then, since the throne at Jerusalem had long since been overthrown, and the kingdom of Judah no longer existed as an independent state, being under the hated jurisdiction of Rome. This subjection to foreign rule was part of God's judgement on His disobedient nation, although David had been originally promised a kingdom that should stand forever. However, at the time when God's decree of punishment was pronounced, a clause was inserted to allow for the throne to be restored, when the rightful heir should be born. The prophet Ezekiel's actual words were:

'I will overturn, overturn, overturn, it: and it shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it him.'¹

¹Ezekiel 21.27

For 600 years since this prophecy was recorded the kingdom of Judah had been under the heel of a succession of foreign powers, the last of which, the Romans, seemed invincible in the days of Joseph and Mary. Only a miracle could make the restoration to former glory possible.

Yet the promise to David had suggested a way whereby such a miracle could be achieved; for God had explained concerning this future heir,
'I will be his father, and he shall be my son.'²

Also, speaking to this 'son' in anticipation of his birth, God had declared,
'Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.'³

But how God would bring into being a human son was not revealed in detail, although a mysterious prophecy through Isaiah had spoken of a highly significant 'sign': '*Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*'⁴ (a Hebrew term meaning 'God with us').

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT

Mary's humble plans for the future were thrown into chaos, when she received a sudden visit from the angel Gabriel. His greeting threw her into confusion, as he pronounced her highly favoured, chosen by God for an important commission, which would bring great blessing upon her. Mary could not imagine what such a greeting could mean, but Gabriel went on to astonish her still further with the announcement that she had been chosen to become the mother of the long awaited Messiah, the heir foretold to David's throne.

Gabriel's message was clearly intended to link up with the phraseology of the original promise to David. After promising, '*thou shalt . . . bring forth a son*', he went on to declare concerning this child,

'He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David.'⁵

But Mary was still confused. How could this messenger from God promise her a son when she was still a virgin? What did this phrase '*Son of the Highest*' mean? In answer to this very innocent but practical objection, Gabriel gave a remarkably explicit yet delicately expressed explanation. He said,

'The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.'⁶

This Divine begettall could only be as a result of a miracle; so to reassure her that such wonders were still being performed, Gabriel broke the news to Mary that

²2 Samuel 7.14 ³Psalm 2.8 ⁴Isaiah 7.14 ⁵Luke 1.32 ⁶Luke 1.35

her cousin Elisabeth, who had given up all hopes of becoming a mother, was even now carrying a child conceived in her old age. But Mary did not need any further confirmation of this promise. In humble and trusting obedience she believed the angel's message, and accepted the great responsibility that parenthood involved, with the immediate response:

'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.'⁷

We should note here the difference between her attitude and that of Zacharias, Elisabeth's husband, who had experienced difficulty in believing an earlier message via Gabriel, concerning the promise of a son, a promise now in process of fulfilment.

This difference in response was commented on by Elisabeth, when visited soon afterwards by Mary in her eagerness to share her new found joy. Elisabeth expressed her approval of Mary's declaration with the words,

'Blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.'⁸

This warm greeting from her cousin stirred Mary into a rapturous expression of her gratitude to God for choosing her for this high destiny, a song of praise revealing a frame of mind and depth of character well worthy of the honour that was now hers.

'And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour . . . For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.'⁹

Mary went on to acknowledge that this miracle was in fulfilment of promises, made many centuries earlier to the ancestors of the Jewish nation, promises she styled '*mercies*', because they involved blessings for all mankind. These blessings form the basis of God's plan of salvation for the human race.

COMPLICATIONS OF PARENTHOOD

But blessings were rather far from Mary's lot at the commencement of her pregnancy, since she was soon faced with the problem of explaining to her family, and her prospective husband in particular, how she had come to be in that state. To claim it as a Divine begettal would sound very much as a vain imagination, little short of blasphemy! Joseph was faced with a hard decision. He knew that the child was not his, but he was reluctant to put Mary to public shame by openly repudiating her as his wife.

To relieve this difficult situation, the angel messenger returned to explain the miracle to Joseph; telling him,

'Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: ("*God saves*") for he shall save his people from their sins.'¹⁰

⁷Luke 1.38 ⁸Luke 1.45 ⁹Luke 1.46,47,49 ¹⁰Matthew 1.20,21

It is to Joseph's great credit that he accepted the angelic explanation without hesitation. Here truly was a righteous man, who was prepared to assume the heavy responsibility of bringing up the child Jesus in partnership with his loving and faithful wife. The home at Nazareth would provide all the security that Jesus needed for an upbringing fully in line with God's requirements for His Son.

But Mary had other problems to contend with. The new taxation edict issued by the Roman authorities necessitated a trying journey to Bethlehem just as she approached her time of delivery; and their failure to find suitable accommodation on arrival resulted in the child being born in extremely humble circumstances. Nevertheless all went well with the birth, and she even had the unexpected pleasure of an appreciative visit from a group of shepherds, who in their forthright way bore testimony to the significance of the occasion, adding their praises to God for allowing them to witness the birth of their future Saviour and anointed King.

A few days later in the temple at Jerusalem, whence they had travelled to circumcise the child in accordance with God's Law given to Moses, she had more cause to wonder, when a devout prophet named Simeon was inspired to pronounce a lofty destiny for Jesus. He was to be '*A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.*'¹¹ But he warned her also of the trouble and grief that she would suffer on account of her son, before she could see him achieve that glorious destiny:

'Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also.'¹²

Mary had many things to ponder over and wonder about, as she brought up her firstborn son. But he was in every way a model child, obedient and sweet tempered. We are told,

'And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.'¹³

Only on one occasion did he cause them some anxiety; and this was in the course of one of their annual visits to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast. It was at the conclusion of the feast, in the general confusion of departure, that the young lad was missed; and it was three days before he was finally traced by his anxious parents. He was found in the temple engrossed in discussion with a group of teachers of the Law, who were astonished at the extent of his understanding at the age of 12.

For him this had been a golden opportunity to increase that wisdom. For his loving parents it had been a time of deep concern. As his mother gently pointed out to him, '*Thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.*'¹⁴ Here is clear evidence of a close family relationship. Joseph and Mary were parents of a high order: the Son of God was in safe keeping!

¹¹Luke 2.32 ¹²Luke 2.35 ¹³Luke 2.40 ¹⁴Luke 2.48

A SAD PARTING

The time came for Jesus to assume his appointed ministry. By this time his younger brothers were contributing to the support of the home, although it would appear that Joseph, their father had died. Jesus departed first to seek his cousin John, who was teaching and baptising his converts in the region of the river Jordan. Immediately following his baptism, Jesus was endowed with the Holy Spirit, which enabled him from then on to perform many notable miracles and signs.

Mary was present at the wedding ceremony on the first occasion when he made use of these extraordinary powers, and with motherly intuition she seemed to anticipate the event, advising the servants at the feast to obey his instructions implicitly. Although complying with her suggestion to remedy the embarrassing shortage of wine, Jesus gently pointed out that their ways must inevitably divert from then on. He had a Divine mission to perform; and the boundary of his service had now expanded to embrace his whole nation.

The next three years were difficult for Mary. On the one hand she was thrilled at her Son's increasing stature and reputation, at his wisdom and the power of his preaching, and at his compassion for the needy who thronged him. But on the other hand she felt increasing anxiety at the opposition he was stirring up amongst the influential Jews, especially the religious leaders: and on more than one occasion she sought with her younger sons to dissuade him from his dangerous challenge to their authority. However, towards the end of his mission, realising that his heart was set to perform his Father's will, she seems to have joined the little band of supporters, who travelled about with the disciples ministering to his needs.

And so it was that on the occasion of his arrest and trial at Jerusalem, Mary was in the little group of mourners who accompanied him on his last journey to the scene of his death. How her heart went out to her son in his final agony! And how touching was the filial devotion, that moved him even then to provide for her care after his departure from this world! Their relationship had been close and rewarding. No mother could have fulfilled her responsibilities more faithfully than did Mary: and it was right that she was at his side at his death.

Her loving care had ensured that his upbringing had been exemplary. She had provided a firm foundation on which he had built to perfection. As '*the handmaid of the Lord*' she had served her God faithfully, and had enabled His great plan of redemption to develop and run to fruition. Now the full scope of that purpose had been revealed, since Jesus had offered himself for the sins of the world. With the rising again from the tomb of the Saviour of the world that purpose was made sure. Love had triumphed over human weakness.

Jesus had

'... abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.'¹⁵

J P Taylor
New Forest

¹⁵² Timothy 1.10

WHEN WILL CHRIST COME?

The return of Jesus Christ to set up the Kingdom of God on earth, is the promise which underpins the message of the Gospel. We live in a troubled world. The problems of disease, crime, war and a general decline in moral standards seem almost insuperable. The 'ethnic cleansing' which has taken place in the Balkan States has horrified all of us; it seems to be a problem that neither politicians nor soldiers are able to solve.

This issue of LIGHT on a NEW WORLD has looked at some of the underlying reasons for man's predicament. It is sad but true that not only are politicians and soldiers unable to provide lasting answers to our problems, the established christian churches fail to provide a united answer. Yet the Bible, on which they claim to base their teaching, provides all the information we need!

What is the answer? The BIBLE tells us:

- ★ Our troubles are the result of SIN;
- ★ Death is the punishment for sin — not the 'gateway' to eternal bliss;
- ★ Eternal life — on earth — is the reward for the righteous;
- ★ Jesus Christ will soon return to the earth.

The very signs we see around us — war, famine, crime and the general distress of the nations — these are the signs that Christ is at the door! Will YOU be ready for his coming?

'There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earath, nations will be in anguish and perplexity . . . Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world . . .'

Luke 21.25,26 (N.I.V.)

You should do some homework — we urge you to turn up the following references in your Bible in the quietness of your home and then act upon the Word of God.

Romans 5.12 Psalm 6.5 Psalm 146.3,4 2 Timothy 1.10 Mark 16.15,16
Acts 1.9-11 Acts 3.20,21 Luke 21.25-37 Isaiah 65.17-25

One Bible, Many Churches . . . Why?

A RECENT VISIT to my local Bible store revealed rows upon rows of Bibles. Copies of the many versions filled the shelves, each version being available in several formats including Study Bibles, Children's Bibles, Bibles with accompanying notes, Bibles for group work, Bibles in large print, Bibles with Greek and Hebrew Lexicons, Bibles on audio tape and even Bibles on computer disk. In spite of their apparent diversity each contained precisely the same message. Had I selected a few copies at random and compared their content I would have found that on the whole any apparent differences were minor and did not affect the principal message and theme.

Let us now take the above analogy and apply it to the many churches that are in our communities. As was the case with the Bibles there are churches of all sizes and descriptions, all claiming to have the same common thread of christianity. However if we were to take a random selection, as I did with the Bibles in the bookstore, would we find a common thread of similar beliefs? The answer is No, for within the common meaning of christianity there is a great divergence of beliefs. Whilst it is accepted that many hold to some basic common doctrines and apparent similarities, the impartial observer could not fail to notice a very wide range of belief systems, some of which are contrary and at times totally opposed, to others even though they carry the same generic title of christianity. The student could be forgiven for thinking that they take their beliefs from a variety of sources and wonder at the common title of Christian and their supposed use of the same basic foundation, the Bible.

Although claiming to be christian and use the Bible as their source most, if not all, have added additional beliefs that have given rise to whole libraries devoted to specific interpretations and explanations. Some, like the Mormons, have provided additional testaments or their own versions of the Bible which differ from those freely available in bookstores.

The development of additional interpretations or amendments is not a recent phenomenon although there are churches whose establishment is relatively recent and not related to any existing organisation. It may be surprising to learn that even while the apostles of Jesus were still alive, active divergent beliefs were beginning to surface. Peter, Paul and John gave crisp and clear warnings that went largely unheeded.

Paul, in Acts chapter 20 offered the following warning:

'I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! . . . I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.'¹

This was reinforced in his letter to Timothy,

'... while evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.'²

'For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.'³

Peter added warnings also,

'There were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them . . . Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.'⁴

An examination of the history of the trinity offers an interesting insight into its introduction and ably illustrates how the original christian beliefs were superseded by man's own reasoning just as Paul and the disciples predicted. The basic principles that formed the foundation of the first century christians such as belief in Christ as the Son of God became less and less as the move to establish the trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost gained momentum (as an aside the word '*trinity*' is nowhere to be found in the Bible). Tertullian is said by some writers to have first used the words '*trinitas*' and '*persona*' in a controversy concerning the relationship of The Word to God.

Gibbon in his work '*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*' suggested that Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, may have been one of the first to employ the term Triad. His writings have been dated as AD 182 and therefore, he suggests, it was introduced after the middle of the second century. It was somewhat later that the Nicene Creed added an oblique reference to the trinitarian principle and permitted interpretations as to whether the Spirit was a person or an influence.

This resulted in the Council at Constantinople in AD 381 adding clarification and confirming the doctrine of three persons in one God. This was fully developed in the Athanasian Creed in the fifth century and thus became embodied in the basic beliefs of the church and continues to be so today. Running parallel at this time was the thinking and influence of Greek philosophy which also contributed to the

¹Acts 20.29-31 (NIV) ²II Timothy 3.13 (NIV) ³II Timothy 4.3,4 (NIV)

⁴II Peter 2.1,2 (NIV)

thinking on the trinity. It is interesting to note that some supporters of the trinity acknowledge that it is not referred to in the Bible. Dr J. S. Whale, former President of Chestnut College, Cambridge in his book '*Christian Doctrine*' (1941) said '*Christian thought, working with the data of the New Testament and using Greek philosophy as its instrument, constructed the doctrine of Trinity in Unity.*' The points outlined here are offered to illustrate how the original teachings of Christ and his disciples were abandoned and left for the thoughts of man and the early Greek philosophers. It therefore comes as no surprise to see man's own thoughts permeating basic Bible principles and leading to the growth of offshoots and reformations over the centuries.

More and more it was suggested, and later stated, by many churches that the Bible's meaning could not be understood by lay people and that its message needed to be 'interpreted' by the leaders of the church. Indeed the established churches went to great lengths to discourage and prevent copies of the Bible from being generally available. The work of such individuals as Tyndale was often carried out in exile and often resulted in their execution.

A tendency towards compromising the teachings of the apostles, both in doctrine and way of life, became more and more apparent with the churches causing many a reformation movement of one kind or another. The Anglican church is a case in point in that it was established as an offshoot to the Roman Catholic Church. Such changes included the principle of belief and subsequent baptism, which of necessity required the commitment of a mature individual and total immersion in water, being changed to the sprinkling or pouring of a few drops of water on a babe in arms.

Even the hope of bodily resurrection at the last day, which was the solid belief of the apostles, became obscured and abandoned as the teaching of the Greek philosophers gained more and more followers. The incorrect teaching of the immortality of the soul gave rise to the problem of the punishment of the wicked. One resolution was the introduction of eternal torment in the ever burning fire of hell to which, we would point out, there can be found no reference in the Bible.

Meanwhile, the simple teaching of the early christian church with its unassuming and humble services gave way to greater and more elaborate rituals in ornate and richly decorated settings. It is now well nigh impossible to trace back to the first century christians, today's orchestrated and ritualised ceremonies. We have in fact turned around 180 degrees. Whereas in the first century those who introduced additional and unsupported beliefs would have been deemed to be astray we now find that those individuals and small groups who try to get back to Bible basics are called heretics, an odd state of affairs indeed.

One has to ask why there are so many churches, all with varying degrees and levels of common beliefs, some with such opposing views that have led to bloodshed, yet all in the name of christianity. Simply put they have gone their own

separate ways, leaving behind shrouded in the mists of time, the true teaching of the Bible.

Christ predicted when he said,

'Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.'⁵

Jesus was speaking primarily about the Jewish nation, soon to experience the wrath of God's judgements, but the same was to happen to the early church. Departure from the simple teaching of Christ and the apostles led to division and the differences that now exist are deep and complex. One only needs to call at the local library and pick up a book on today's churches to discover volume after volume identifying and detailing the variety that now exists.

In the 1990s we talk about living in a time of constant change with that phrase applying to all aspects of life including christianity. However we must accept that the teaching of the Bible does not support such an attitude. Its teaching has not changed and indeed warns against so doing. It is also interesting to note that all the changes in society tend towards a lowering of morals and standards, generally to make acceptable that which previously was not.

From this short article we can see how Christendom left the teaching of Jesus and his apostles, the true authority on doctrine. The introduction of a whole spectrum of man's thoughts and ideas has resulted in a situation that leaves the established church fulfilling Paul's prophecy that man would '*turn from truth unto fables*' and has strayed from the true '*Gospel of the Kingdom of God*'.

So where is all this leading — and what can I do about it? may be the question in your mind. Our suggestion is that you put aside all the preconceived ideas and beliefs that have been promoted over the centuries and focus on just one book — the Bible. A careful consideration of it's teaching on God's plan for salvation, the activities of His son Jesus, and the early writers will give you the opportunity, quite literally, to start afresh.

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⁵Luke 12.51 (NIV)